Social Transactions in the American fiction; a critical study in the fictions of Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather

Final Synopsis

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"Social Transactions in the American Fiction; a Critical study of the fictions of Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather"

Social transactions are transactions within a social setting that are built on anything other than money; like emotions, friendship, love, bonding, trust, etc. In a social setting, there are always transactions going on. They have a tendency to occur subconsciously and on the subliminal level.

Transactional analysis predicts the kind of responses our interventions may evoke from people. When people interact in assertive or non-assertive ways, there is a social transaction in which one person responds to another. The study of these social transactions between people is called transactional analysis.

Transactional analysis was developed by Eric Berne for psychotherapy in the 1950s. It was popularized by Berne's book *Games People Play* (1964), the writings of Thomas Harris' *I Am OK – You Are OK* (1960), Muriet James and Dorothy Jougeward and Abe Wagner. Jougeward and Wagner have shown how the concepts of transactional analysis can be applied to organizations.

The objective of transactional analysis is to provide better understanding of how people relate to one another so that they may develop improved communication and human relationships.

The present thesis is going to discuss about social transactions in the American 1920's. There were many changes in the social customs and day-to-day life of millions of Americans during the 1920's. Americans created a consumer culture in which automobiles, home appliances, and other goods were purchased at an unprecedented rate. Advertising helped to fuel this desire to purchase, and the

popularity of radio and motion pictures helped to create a more uniform national culture.

Sinclair Lewis, attacked America's prevalent Protestant, middle-class, conformist morality. He produced a series of satirical novels that examined in detail the iconic figures found in every town in America: business leaders, doctors and preachers. Willa Cather wrote that the main business of *The Professor's House* was to show the emptiness and futility of modern civilization when compared to ancient civilizations. *A Lost Lady* deals with the same issues.

Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* is about a middle-aged businessman who rebels against his safe life and family, only to realize that the young generation is as hypocritical as his own. *The Job* is about the struggle of women of the 1920's who could chose to be either housewives or working women.

The study tries to reveal the reasons for the failures of the protagonists. The characters in all the selected novels are prone to the rapid changes around them. Nobody tries to understand why they have to change with the changing world; nobody tries to understand why the changes are taking place and their consequences. The only thing they do is to bear the aftermaths. There were no social transactions in them. If they were there, people could communicate their issues with each other; could communicate their fears with each other. Due to this failure in social transaction, the people of the 1920's and the characters could not help others or themselves to get out of their restricted, unhappy lives.

By changing the unfavorable events that led to despair and continuing the benefits to society, one can understand why they happen and better the future.

Therefore, to improve social relations, one has to strive for having better social transactions.

With a critical examination of the works of Willa Cather and Harry Sinclair Lewis, the present study is to focus on the failure of communication among the American society of the 1920's.

A critical examination of the body of fictional works with a central focus on their major themes and fictional techniques, the proposed study, assumes, will convincingly bring out the creative engagement of the selected authors with, basically, the American culture of the 1920's and the prevailing doctrinarian that governs life.

Chapter Scheme:

This study will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter I - Introduction

Chapter II - Survey of modernism 1920's

Chapter III - Sinclair Lewis

Chapter IV - Willa Cather

Chapter V - Conclusion

Chapter I - Introduction

The 1920s era went by such names as the Jazz Age, the Age of Intolerance, and the Age of Wonderful Nonsense. Under any moniker, the era embodied the beginning of modern America. Numerous Americans felt buoyed up following World War I (1914-1918). America had survived a deadly worldwide influenza epidemic (1918).The new decade would be a time of change for everyone - not all of it good.

More than one phrase used to describe 1920s. Principally in North America, but also in London, Paris and Berlin. The phrase was meant to emphasize the period's social, artistic, and cultural dynamism. Finally the Wall Street Crash of 1929 served to punctuate the end of the era, as The Great Depression set in the era was further distinguished by several inventions and discoveries of far-reaching importance, unprecedented industrial growth, accelerated consumer demand and aspirations, and significant changes in lifestyle.

The Social Transition known as the Roaring Twenties or The Jazz Age began in North America and spread to Europe in the aftermath of World War I. Europe spent these years rebuilding and coming to terms with the vast human cost of the conflict. The economy of the United States became increasingly intertwined with that of Europe.

We can observe that there were more than one aspect refers to the Social Transition among America. After World War I and the flu epidemic, Individuals were exuberant to be alive. The economic prosperity of the 1920s and the growth of the stock market influenced splurges in spending.

Many people believe that the 1920's marked a new era in American history. The decade often is referred to as the "Roaring Twenties." Following World War I, many returning veterans and men women who had moved from cities to cities to seek wartime jobs had no desire to return to working in factories or on the farms.

They hoped to live a more comfortable life, like the ones that they could see on the movie screens or read about in magazines and newspapers. New social activities promoted a more carefree lifestyle. Couples could enjoy playing miniature golf, participating in dance contests, listening to the radio or the phonograph, and participating in any number of other events. The flappers--women who dressed provocatively, had bobbed hairstyles, went to clubs, smoked, and drank bootleg alcohol--represented this supposedly new and less-inhibited lifestyle.

As a natural reaction to the Social Transitions, there was also a Social Conservatism in the American Society. We can define the Social Conservatism as a political or moral ideology that believes government and/or society have a role in encouraging or enforcing what they consider traditional values or behaviors based on the belief that these are what keep people civilized and decent.

Chapter II- A survey of modernism 1920s

The modern novel begins in Modernism-but just with this beginning itself it is open to debate. Some people make it as early 1857, the year of two foundational works of French Modernism: Baudelaire's Les *Fleurs du Mal* and Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary.* Some make it 1901, the year Queen Victoria died, taking with her the allegedly stultifying traditions of Victorian culture, thinking that World War I was the cataclysmic rupture that separated the civilized past from a future of chaos. Virginia Woolf dated the change to 1910, and Cather dated it to 1922, but in any case it is clear that Modernism (and the modern novel) was in full swing by the 1922 publication of *Ulysses,* the book that was Joyce's masterpiece and the very encyclopedia of modernist forms.

The writers of the 1920S had depicted a realistic pictures of the American society 1920S in all its aspects, the changes of the society, the loss of its virginity, the struggle and the conflict between the old and the new generations and the failure of the social transactions. Those writers had experienced the changes that taken place in the American society and portrait them in their own writings. This chapter would discuss briefly some of the most dominant writers during 1920s like Edith Wharton, Fitzgerald, O'Neill, T. S. Eliot, Earnest Hemingway and some other contemporary writers.

Chapter III- Sinclair Lewis

(February 7, 1885-January 10, 1951), was the first American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was a novelist, short-story writer, and playwright. His works are known for their insightful and critical views of American society and capitalist values, as well as for their strong characterizations of modern working women. His style is at times droll, satirical, yet sympathetic. The study attempts to study his following two novels.

The Job

With the passing of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women finally attained the political equality that they had so long been fighting for. Prior to this Amendment, feminists commonly thought that one could have either a career or one could have a husband and a family, for one would inherently inhibit the development of the other. This mentality began to change in the 20s as more women began to desire not only successful careers of their own but also families. The "new" woman was eager to compete and to find personal fulfillment. The 1920s also saw a significant change in the lives of working women. World War I had temporarily allowed women to enter into industries such as chemical,

automobile, and iron and steel manufacturing, which were once deemed inappropriate work for women.

Sinclair Lewis's *The Job* (1917) is one of the earliest books admonishing equal rights for women workers. This book was very controversial during its time pushing women's rights, dealing with anti-Semitism, and was daring enough to mention alcoholism, venereal disease, divorce, adoption by a single women, and women who drink and smoke. Throughout dealing with all this, the main heroine, Una, still remains a proper Victorian lady. She desires to establish herself in a legitimate occupation while balancing the eventual need for marriage. The story takes place in the early 1990-1920s and takes Una from a small Panama, Pennsylvania town to New York. Forced to work due to family illness, Una shows a talent for the traditional male bastion of commercial real estate and, while valued by her company, she struggles to achieve the same status of her male coworkers.

Despite her professional success, Una is not satisfied with her life. Her quest for traditional romance and love is important but her unique role as a working woman, doing a man's job, makes it tough to find an appropriate suitor. There is little romance in her business world and few people to talk to. She is in lack of people and lack of communication which makes her life empty of voices or sounds. She accepts anyone in her life with whom she thinks she can communicate her heart to. But all of them depart from her one way or the other. Her parents die, her friends are married off, and her love is taken away by faith and her husband by his reckless behavior. Finally, she remains alone.

Eventually, her love, Walter Babson, turns up again at the end of the novel and it seems that she will accept him, abandoning her earlier idea of being a single mother and adopting a child. But Una, who has made a career for herself, makes it clear that she is not going to marry in order to be minding that cat and the gas-stove...'

Babbitt, first published in 1922, is a novel largely a satire of American culture, society, and behavior, it critiques the vacuity of middle- class American life and its pressure on individuals toward conformity.

Babbitt was a realistic picture of the American society of 1920s, the Materialistic was the dominant print of every aspect of their life, and people were so concerned about machine and about comfortable life more than the real meaning of life.

Babbitt was too helpless towards the way of thinking of his family, from the above conversation with his wife, we could examine the kind of struggle that he had with his daughters as well as his son. The plan that he had already made for their future and all the sacrifices throughout his life went in vain in the face of materialistic way of thinking. Babbitt was too upset and he confessed that he can't stand them anymore!! Babbitt was unhappy with his family that he has achieved everything in his life but still he could not find himself that feeling was out of being inside a family, it was as quite different way of thinking and thus resulted to impossibility of social transactions.

Babbitt is simply a subject to an unappeasable restlessness because "home" for him is always only a simulacrum of a thing he hasn't got. Seeking a material success and standardization of the American society of 1920s had made Babbitt as an individual away of the real meaning of life and away of the values. Babbitt had double struggle with himself and his entire society; he was searching of himself in a shattered family and in a hollow society. He cannot escape from places that remind him of what he has left behind and thus of what he has not yet found; he is perpetually in a position to realize that he has still to come home.

Chapter IV-Willa Cather

Cather (December 7, 1873[1] -April 24,1947),born as Willa Siebert Cather was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American author who achieved recognition for her novels of frontier life on the Great Plains, works such as *O Pioneers!, My Antonia*, and *The song of the Lark.* In 1923 she was awarded the Pulitzer for *One of Ours* (1922), a novel set during World War I. The progression of her novels suggests a thematic shift from a celebration of nature and frontiers in the 1910s to a cynical vision of mortality and loss in the 1920s. Not coincidentally, this shift parallels the transformation of American law from individualist law to what Bernard Schwartz calls a "socialization of law," a refocusing.

A Lost Lady was first published in 1923. It tells the story of Marian Forrester and her husband, Captain Daniel Forrester who live in the Western town of Sweet Water, along the Transcontinental Railroad.

Marian Forrester, the 'Lost Lady', is the symbolic flower of the Old American West. She draws her strength from that solid foundation, bringing delight and beauty to her husband, an elderly railroad pioneer, to the small town of Sweet Water where they live, to the prairie land itself, and to the young narrator of her story, Neil Herbert. All are bewitched by her brilliance and grace, all are ultimately betrayed. For Marian longs for "life on any terms", and in fulfilling herself, she loses all she loved and all who loved her. Through Niel Herbert, we witness the decline of Mrs. Forrester, and also of the West itself from the idealized age of noble pioneers to the age of capitalist exploitation.

It charts the transitional period between the pioneering days of the Burlington railroad and ushering in of the new generation of young people with their new methods of doing business and their equally new ways of living. Early on the novel, the reader is told that Mrs. Forrester mocked outrageously at the

proprieties she observed, and inherited the magic of contradiction. It is this description that seems to explain the difficulties of Mrs. Forrester's position in the novel as she belongs neither to the generation of pioneers that her husband, Captain Forrester, represents, nor the generation that is to follow because she carries elements of this past with her. As such, she embodies a kind of in-between state that, in some respects, suggests to the reader that she is firmly of the old order and yet, in other respects, suggests that she is set upon establishing herself within the new order of things.

It is a character study of a woman at a time of change in the American west; a character study of America at the time of the railroad booms as it evolves alongside changing ideas of morality and social convention; a study of a complex web of relationships: friendship, love, loyalty rooted in respect, gratitude or feudal Class based tradition.

A lost Lady is primarily a transcendent of realism, arriving shortly before The Great Gatsby which shares many of its characteristic. A characteristic of this type of novel is that the society is in transition from an old culture to a new, a power struggle that causes that a preference for an idealized past. It leads to a conflict between idealism and coarseness and that leads into the failure of social transactions.

The Professor's House

The novel ultimately published in 1925 was written over the course of several years. It narrates the story of Godfrey St. Peter, also known as the professor who finds himself emotionally isolated from his family in transitional time in the family's development. He is a professor of history at Hamilton University. Godfrey's name comes from Godfrey of Boulogne, the conqueror who took Jerusalem (A.S.Byatt): St. Peter is the rock on which the Roman church was built:

St. Peter is writing about pioneers, where every bit of his name comes from famous pioneers in history.

When the Professor and his wife move to their new house, he becomes uncomfortable with the route his life is taking. He keeps on his dusty study in the old house in an attempt to hang on to his old life. Also the marriages of his two daughters have removed them from the home and added two new sons-in-law, precipitating a midlife crisis that leaves the Professor feeling as though he has lost the will to live because he has nothing to look forward to.

Professor's house has depicted the gap between the two generations and had examined the failure of social transactions amongst the family members as an instance of the American society 1920s; the new house was not simply rejected by St. Peter just being a new house but it depicted the new kind of value, ethics, materialistic life style and that's why it has been rejected by the professor. St. Peter couldn't have a social transactions with the people around and so the only solution for him was to isolate himself from others.

Chapter V- Conclusion

This chapter will offer a thoroughly research hypothesis establishing the Social Transaction in the American society in 1920s and how the society affected in the novels of Willa Cather and Harry Sinclair Lewis.

The American writers represent two voices in the cotemporary discourse in the term of the academic training and use of methodology. The two writers stand the taste of rigorous scholarly discipline and the standard knowledge.

The need to develop a research proposal on these two writes assumes urgency in view of the academic need to acknowledge the contribution made by these writers. The debate on the American Novel is very ripe and much discussed, that's why the study of these writes is much relevant.

In the American Novel the importance of reflecting reality became a dominant theme in 1920s and 1930s.Writers such as Harry Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Carl Sandburg and Earnest Hemingway.

This chapter will be the thrust of the study of the novels of Willa Cather and Harry Sinclair Lewis who depicted a realistic picture of the American society and how the Novel became an important power of reflecting and facing the reality. It will, in particular focus how far the study has fulfilled the objectives if the study.

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